



[Antonio Gramsci, 1891-1937](#)

## Some Aspects of the Southern Question

It is a mistake to treat Antonio Gramsci's contribution to political thought as substantially separated in time, or in content, from that of Vladimir Lenin, Rosa Luxemburg, and the other revolutionary internationalists who were Gramsci's classic contemporaries.

Gramsci was in Moscow in 1922 and 1923 and met and married his wife there. As a representative of the Italian Communist Party (PCI), he was familiar with the workings of the Comintern. Lenin died in 1924. Gramsci was imprisoned by the Italian fascists in November, 1926, and was not released until just before his death, eleven years later, in 1937.

The great revival in his reputation came with the publishing of Gramsci's "Prison Diaries" not long after the 1945 defeat of fascism in Europe. But the problem with these diaries is that they are voluminous, and were not edited by the author for publication. Hence there have been disputes and rival claims as to what Gramsci stood for, and about what his precise contribution to classical political theory was.

There is a [Gramsci Archive here](#), on MIA.

The 1926 document "[Some Aspects of the Southern Question](#)" (download linked below) is the last that Gramsci wrote before his incarceration. Although on the face of it unfinished, yet it is certainly a classic, and it has great relevance to the National Democratic Revolution, whether in South Africa or elsewhere. In the beginning of its third paragraph, Gramsci says:

*"The Northern bourgeoisie has subjugated the South of Italy and the Islands, and reduced them to exploitable colonies..."*

Northern Italy, where there are many great cities including Turin, home of the giant Fiat company, was as "developed" as France, Germany and England were in the first quarter of the twentieth century. But south of Rome, and on the large Italian islands of Sardinia and Sicily, the people lived very differently. In many ways the situation in Italy resembled the "Colonialism of a Special Type" that was maturing in South Africa in the same period, and which lasted until the South African democratic breakthrough of the 1990s. Colonised and colonisers were simultaneously present in the same territory.

The Italian Southerners were even subjected to racial contempt, such that, as Gramsci records:

*“It is well known what kind of ideology has been disseminated in myriad ways among the masses in the North, by the propagandists of the bourgeoisie: the South is the ball and chain which prevents the social development of Italy from progressing more rapidly; the Southerners are biologically inferior beings, semi-barbarians or total barbarians, by natural destiny...”* and so on.

As a communist, Gramsci advocated *“the political alliance between Northern workers and Southern peasants, to oust the bourgeoisie from State power.”* But he follows this bare formulation with many fascinating incidences and details about the class structure and class dynamics of Italy at the time and during the preceding three decades, which included the First World War and the subsequent rise of Mussolini’s fascists. Gramsci accompanies these narratives with an exceptional sensitivity towards the role of intellectuals, whom he comes close to treating as a distinct class.

Gramsci writes:

*“Intellectuals develop slowly, far more slowly than any other social group, by their very nature and historical function. **They represent the entire cultural tradition of a people, seeking to resume and synthesize all of its history.** This can be said especially of the old type of intellectual: the intellectual born on the peasant terrain. To think it possible that such intellectuals, en masse, can break with the entire*

*past and situate themselves totally upon the terrain of a new ideology, is absurd. It is absurd for the mass of intellectuals, and perhaps it is also absurd for very many intellectuals taken individually as well - notwithstanding all the honourable efforts which they make and want to make.”*

Yet Gramsci regards such an intellectual break as crucial, saying:

*“This is gigantic and difficult, but precisely worthy of every sacrifice on the part of those intellectuals - from North and South - who have understood that only two social forces are essentially national and bearers of the future: the proletariat and the peasants.”*

It is fitting that the last of the classics in our ten-part series on “The Classics” includes such words as these from Gramsci, reminding us that for as much as the “classics” provide us with a foundation, yet there is “gigantic and difficult” intellectual work still ahead, so that we should never treat our classics as dogma, and their authors as eternal authorities. To do so would be to betray them.

- The above is to introduce the original reading-text: [Some Aspects of the Southern Question, 1926, Gramsci.](#)
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